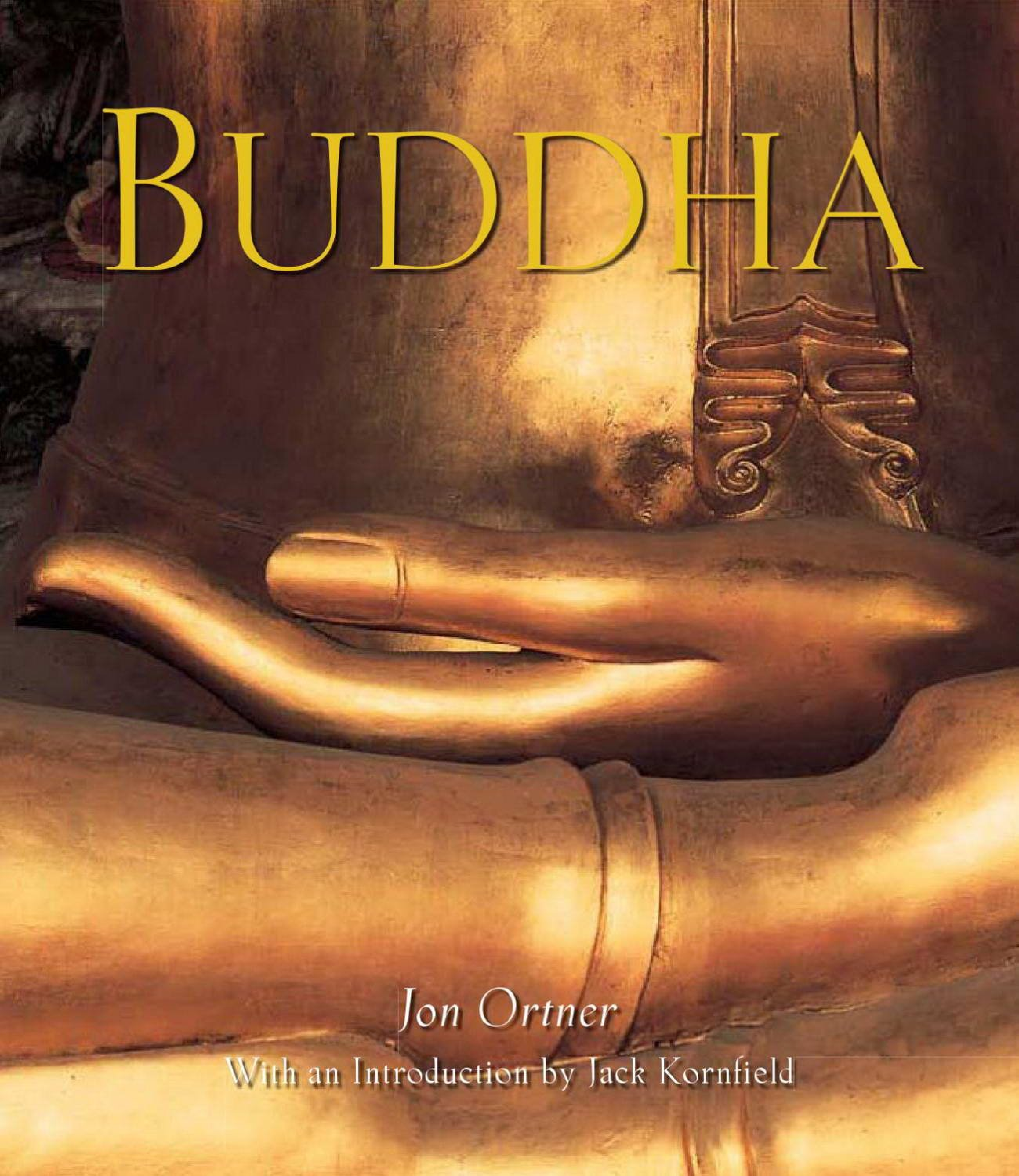
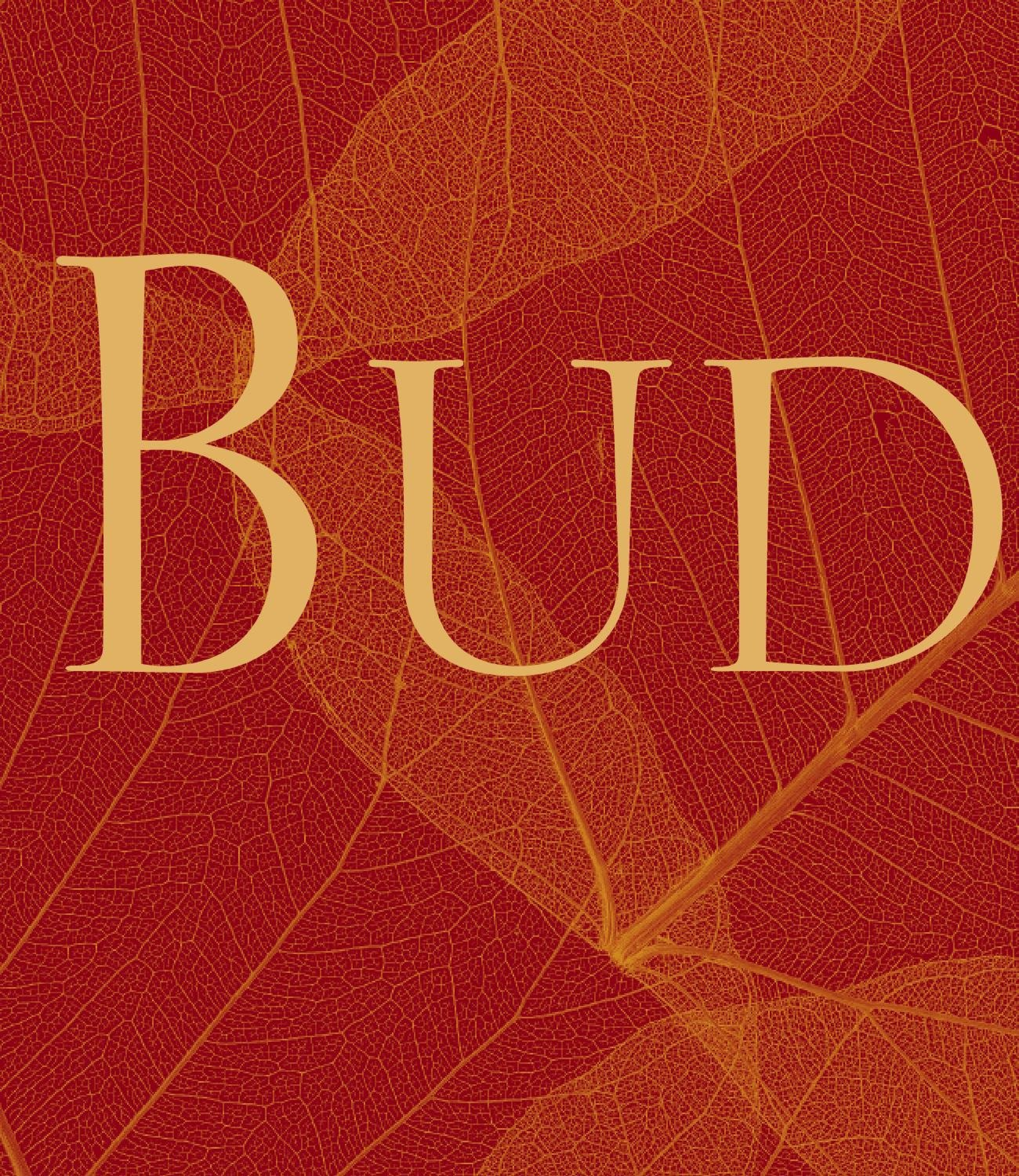


BUDDHA

Jon Ortner

With an Introduction by Jack Kornfield


BUD

DHA

Photographs by Jon Ortner

With Sayings of the Buddha

Introduction by Jack Kornfield

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2. 3, & 4. Wat Suthat, Bangkok, Thailand *(pages 2–5)*
5. Bagan, Myanmar *(page 10)*

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Foreword

Jon Ortner

My first fascination was with the wonders of nature—in particular, with insects. At a very young age I became an avid collector, mostly of *Lepidoptera*, and passionately read and absorbed everything I could on the subject. My curiosity gave me the perfect excuse to venture out on my own, exploring secret places and examining nature's simple marvels. At that time, the late 1950s and early 1960s, Long Island's north shore was changing, its vast estates and farms slowly giving way to subdivisions and suburban sprawl. Some had just been abandoned. I would sneak into these romantic edens, where lawns had become rolling

fields of milkweed, Queen Anne's Lace, and black-eyed Susans. I would walk softly through the English-style formal gardens, whose walls were now crumbling, their fountains silenced, their once carefully laid-out beds overgrown. The air was rich with the scents of wildflower and hay, alive with the buzz of cicadas, the whir of hummingbird wings and the squeaks of chipmunks. I'd come across a box turtle, unearth a spotted salamander, or find a rare butterfly. Every day provided a naturalist's thrill.

As my curiosity grew into a passion, I learned the scientific nomenclature and observational skills needed to accurately identify different species. I discovered that the Linnaean system of categorizing organisms—into Phylum, Family, Genus, and Species—instantly gave not only the exact identification of an animal, but its relation to every other organism on earth. I eagerly studied the scientific disciplines of evolution and cladistics. With this acquired knowledge of the interrelationships of all living things came a vastly enriched understanding and enjoyment of the natural world.

In my teens, my lifelong love of the outdoors was matched by a longing for spiritual knowledge. Like so many before me, I turned to the writings of Hermann Hesse and Heinrich Zimmer, which led me to the work of the Buddhist philosopher D.T. Suzuki, and then to that of Ashvaghosha. While at university, I continued my scholarly pursuits in science and eastern philosophy. Linnaeus's natural order, I sensed, had strong parallel in the enormous structural cosmology of Hindu metaphysics. This realization led me to the Buddhist texts that focused on concepts of self, causation, and impermanence. Yet my interest was that of a young man: active and restless rather than contemplative.

And so I was drawn to India and Nepal by these twin passions—a desire to experience the spirituality embodied in these writings, and the exotic natural world of tropical Asia. The fact that these locations were literally on

the other side of the planet—as far away as I could possibly go—intrigued me. It would be an adventure, a challenge to all that was familiar. But my first journey to the East, in 1971, came with a predictable result: naïve as I was, I was shocked by India's abject poverty, lack of sanitation, and intensely mercenary environment. I had imagined a dreamlike landscape, suffused with spirituality and wisdom. What I encountered instead was just the opposite—crowded, defiled, and decidedly un-holy.

As quickly as I could, I left the cities. I sought out the most spiritually charged sites I could find: the ancient temples, caves, forests, and rivers long held sacred as dwelling places of the gods. And it was at these shrines that I finally felt the sense of holiness and serenity I'd been searching for, and met the yogis and monks practicing lives of contemplation, discipline, and asceticism. The asceticism affected me powerfully: it was my first overwhelming experience of the Buddha nature.

One trip became another, then another. I began to understand the symbolic meaning of Hindu and Buddhist religious art—in which every temple is a representation of the cosmos, transposed to earth to function as a dwelling place of spiritual power and a focal point for the purification of the mind. I learned that every building is a cosmic calendar, every architectural measurement a reference to time, every floor plan a mandala. Moreover, every representation of the Buddha is equally rich with meaning. Every aspect of every image—the position of the body, the proportion of the body parts, the position of the hands, the attire—plays its own role in a language of complex iconography.

Photographing Buddhist art became my window into this world. I especially sought out the art and architecture of the original Theravadin traditions, many of which were still *in situ*—still at the geomantically charged sites that had called them forth. I visited as many holy places as I could,

deciphering the iconography carefully within philosophical and historical contexts. Seeing these symbols worshipped, revered, and sanctified according to traditions that have existed for thousands of years was, for me, like finally witnessing the heart and soul of the culture I traveled so far to find. I wanted not merely to observe the wisdom of these practitioners and the sanctity of these places, but to join the faithful and experience the divine—to feel the contentment of my fellow pilgrims. And while using a camera was my ostensible reason for being there, as my interest in the natural world had been my motivation to wander those Long Island meadows of my youth, so too in these temples I found an inexhaustible source for exploration, experience and, ultimately, love. I came to understand these places and images as direct manifestations of a philosophy that penetrates right through to the very nature of reality and consciousness. For this is a philosophy that attends to the suffering of the human condition, and to our existential loneliness, and that points the way toward compassion and enlightenment.

While creating these images during my twenty-five years of travel throughout Asia, I encountered innumerable challenges and difficulties. Many of the statues, frescos, and carvings are hidden or sequestered, while others are protected by fences and guards. The work has taught me patience. For doors are ultimately unlocked, and gates are opened. And this kind of photography entails aspects of meditation. To wait for exactly the right light and to return time after time to the same place is, in fact, a form of contemplation.

This work was undertaken to preserve and share images that convey the deep spiritual conviction I saw around me, but my experiences have proved extraordinarily enriching. For each encounter with the Buddha is a privilege. It is my fervent wish that these photographs unlock similar doors for all who see them.

J. O., New York City, 2003

Introduction

Jack Kornfield

It is said that soon after his enlightenment the Buddha passed a man on the road who was struck by the Buddha's extraordinary radiance and peaceful presence. The man stopped and asked, "My friend, what are you? Are you a celestial being or a god?"

"No," said the Buddha.

"Well, then, are you some kind of magician or wizard?"

Again, the Buddha answered, "No."

"Are you a man?"

"No."

"Well, my friend, then what are you?" The Buddha replied, "I am awake."

Buddha means "one who is awake," and the teachings of Buddhism express the Noble Path discovered by the Buddha to lead all beings to awakening. History tells that the Buddha was born a prince named Siddhartha Gotama to a royal family of North India over 2,500 years ago. He was raised in palatial luxury, given every pleasure, and shielded by his parents from the troubles of the world. As he grew older and traveled throughout his kingdom, he became acutely aware of the suffering in human

6. Ananda Pagoda, Bagan, Myanmar

life. He saw the inevitability of loss, aging, sickness, and death. Then he encountered a yogi who had renounced the world. Deeply affected by what he had seen, at age twenty-nine the Buddha left the palace to becomes a wandering ascetic in the forests of India. He dedicated his life to seeking an answer to the problem of human suffering.

For six years he fasted and undertook an austere struggle, battling against the desires of his own body and mind. But after these years of physical deprivation, he found himself near starvation and no closer to freedom. Searching for direction, he overheard a fisherman teaching a young boy how to play the lute: "When the strings are just right—not too loose and not too tight—only then can you start to make music." Perhaps, Siddhartha considered, there was another path besides the extremes of worldly indulgence or self-denial, a Middle Way—a life of inner and outer balance. Inspired by these thoughts, he seated himself calmly beneath the shelter of a *bodhi* tree and vowed to meditate there until he found an answer. Siddhartha remained in this spot as he faced the forces of human suffering: fear, doubt, temptation, greed, and hatred. Unmoved by every vision that arose before him, he rested with an open heart and a clear mind. Looking deeply into the nature of all existence with understanding and compassion, he discovered true peace, a freedom of heart in the midst of all things. He was enlightened.

For nearly fifty years afterward, he traveled on foot across India teaching the reality of this inner freedom to all who would listen. From the first, he taught the Four Noble Truths, beginning with the Truth of Suffering. He then described the Causes of Suffering: greed, hatred, and ignorance. He taught the Noble Truth of the heart's release from suffering which he called *Nirvana*—cool, inviting and peaceful. And finally, he taught the Noble Truth of the Path to this freedom: the path of virtue, meditation, wise understanding, and compassion.

Everywhere he went, people came to listen to his words. Gradually there grew across India a large, devoted community of followers, monks, nuns, and laypeople of all castes and creeds. The practices and teachings offered by the Buddha, who was also known as the Blessed One and the Happy One, transformed the lives of his devotees.

From the first years, his devoted followers created sacred temples, *stupas*, and pagodas as monuments to the teachings of enlightenment and as resting places for monks and nuns. In the earliest centuries after the founding of Buddhism, there were no depictions of the Buddha himself, only symbols: a wheel, an empty throne, a footprint, a lotus, a deer—all standing in for the Blessed One. This earliest Buddhist art conveyed the stillness and simplicity of the Buddha's Way. As his teachings became more popular, the artistry of its depictions also changed. Several hundred years later, after Greek influences spread across India, the first known Buddha statues appeared. Carved in stone, they look like the god Apollo.

Gradually the seeds of the teachings and practices of the Buddha spread from the middle kingdoms of India to the nearby lands of Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, and then across China and Japan to all of Asia. As the teachings spread, so did the enthusiasm for the building of sacred temples and *stupas*, and with them came a grand flowering of Buddhist art and architecture. Each of these cultures found its creative gifts, its artists' delight in awakening the heart of the Buddha in a myriad of new forms offered to the ages—all unsigned and selfless.

In *Buddha*, Jon Ortner has artistically and magically captured the breadth of this flowering in 155 images of spirit and devotion, of haunting beauty and serenity. In these images, the Buddha—some recent, some a thousand years old—smiles at us and offers with his hands a gesture of peace. Or he looks at our sufferings with the awakened vision of his third

eye of wisdom and offers a symbol of fearlessness. In the shapes of these pagodas every element—earth, air, fire, and water—is represented in balance, and every tier of the spire symbolizes a higher and more subtle state of consciousness. Each of these *stupas* and gestures and *mudras*, each of the Buddha's varied postures, each illuminated temple and pagoda is filled with the symbolism of awakening. More than that—each is filled with hope. Hope for the awakening of the great heart of compassion in every being who gazes upon them. Hope that we who see them will be inspired to live our days with the unshakable peace of a Buddha.

Often these images and temples shine because they are covered in gold and jewels. To his devoted followers this represents the preciousness of the Three Jewels: Buddha; *Dharma*, the liberating teachings; and *Sangha*, the enlightened community. These Three Jewels are esteemed above all else. Equally symbolic, the untarnishable purity of gold symbolizes the luminous, shining, timeless quality of consciousness itself, our own Buddha Nature, the fundamental purity of every being proclaimed by the Buddha. The gold and jewels of his teachings of peace and compassion shine forth sparkling and illuminating the world.

Entering the temples and sacred shrines in this book depicted by Jon Ortner's photographs offers a sacred journey to the reader. The impact of being in the presence of such symbolic beauty is cooling and calming to the senses. Seeing these Buddhas can be touching and inspiring in a palpable and transformative way. Thomas Merton described such an experience in his last book, *The Asian Journals*. One morning, visiting the ancient Sri Lankan monastery of Polonarua, he walked across a vast, grassy lawn to visit several enormous statues of the Buddha carved into a gigantic marble cliff. To Merton they were almost alive, charged, among the most wonderful works of art he had ever encountered. Looking at the Buddhas, peaceful and open,

he saw "the silence of the extraordinary faces, the great smiles, huge, and yet subtle, filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, rejecting nothing. The great smiles of peace, not of emotional resignation, but a peace that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything—without refutation. It is simple. For those who see with the eyes of the Buddha, the whole world arises in emptiness and everything in it is connected in compassion."

It is this awakened and compassionate consciousness that is captured so beautifully in these pages. Alongside the sacred images of these temples and Buddha statues Jon has printed the sacred teachings of the Buddha himself. These words come primarily from the ancient Pali language, the earliest recorded sayings of the Buddha. The ancient stories tell us that when they were first spoken—in dialogue or in an assembly of devoted followers—many of those who listened were enlightened. So turn these pages slowly, listen to these words, read them like a pilgrimage. Let the blessings of the images renew your spirit. And let the Buddha's teachings of truth, of compassion, and of freedom awaken your heart to the freedom and compassion that is your own Buddha Nature.

May you and all beings
live with the blessings of compassion
and a liberated heart.

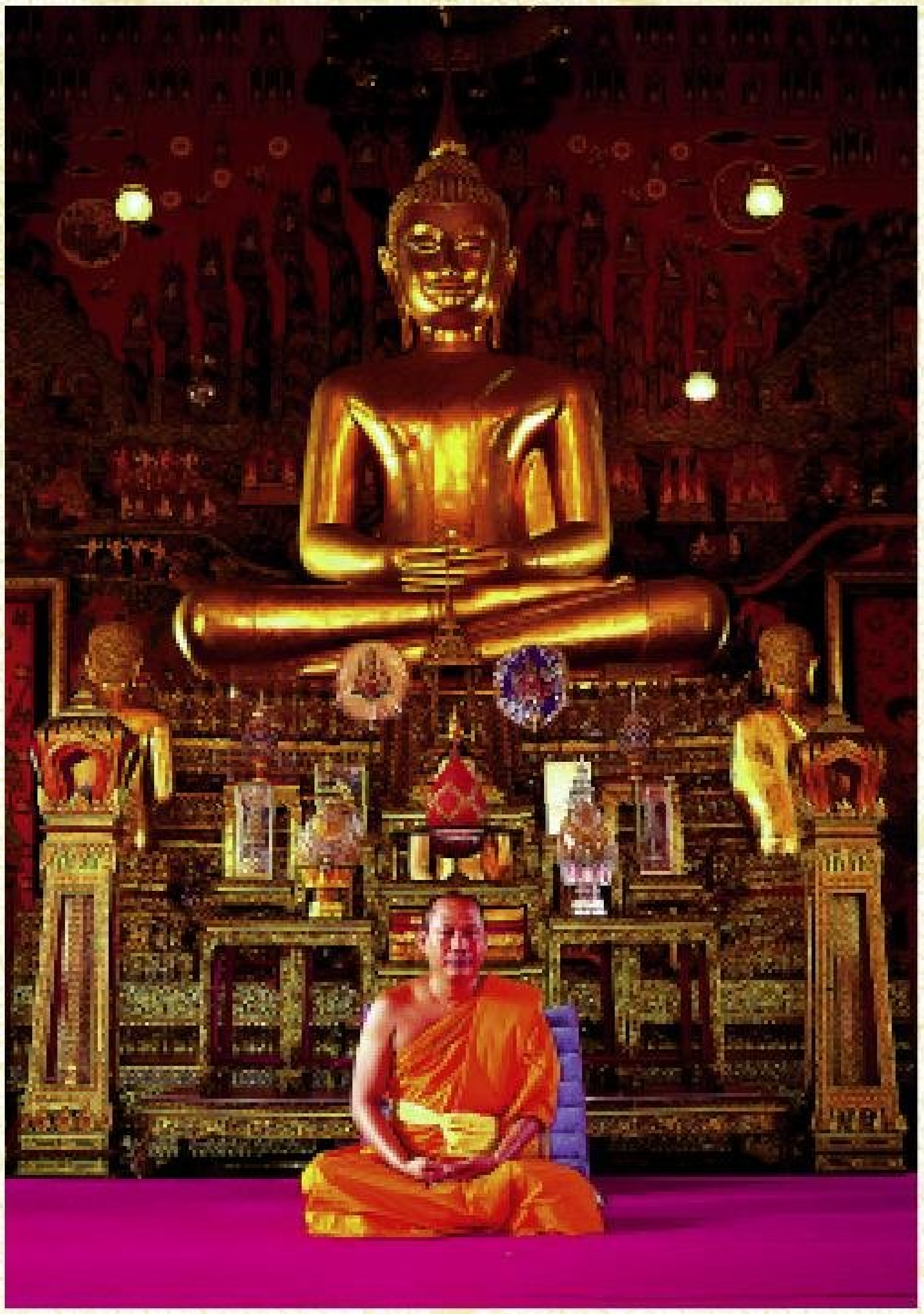
J. K., Spirit Rock Center, Woodacre, California, 2003

Human Existence

Everything arises and passes away.
When you see this, you are above sorrow.
This is the shining way.

Existence is sorrow.
Understand, and go beyond sorrow.
This is the way of brightness.

Existence is illusion.
Understand, go beyond.
This is the way of clarity.



All things appear and disappear
Because of causes and condition.
Nothing ever exists entirely alone;
Everything is in relation to everything else.

7. SHWEZIGON PAGODA, Bagan, Myanmar *(opposite)*
8. WAT SAKET, Bangkok, Thailand

9. NANH PAYA, Sale, Myanmar

10 & 11. *Jataka* plaques, ANANDA PAGODA, Bagan, Myanmar
12. ANANDA PAGODA, Bagan, Myanmar *(opposite)*

13. Yoesoe Kyaung Monastery, Sale, Myanmar *(opposite)*
14. Bagan, Myanmar

Pleasures flow everywhere.
You float upon them
And are carried from life to life.

Like a hunted hare you run,
The pursuer of desire pursued,
Harried from life to life.

15. Yadanar Theinka Paya, Inwa, Myanmar

16. North Gate, ANGKOR THOM, Siem Reap, Cambodia *(opposite)*
17. Beng Mealea, Cambodia
18. BAYON, ANGKOR THOM, Siem Reap, Cambodia *(overleaf)*

Not in the sky,
Nor in the midst of the ocean,
Nor deep in the mountains,
Nowhere
Can you hide from your own death.

19 & 20. WAT BOWONIVET, Bangkok, Thailand

21. Wat Xieng Thong, Luang Prabang, Laos *(opposite)*
22. Shwesigone Pagoda, Monywa, Myanmar

23 & 24. Wat Sen Soukharam, Luang Prabang, Laos

Do not be the judge of people;
Do not make assumptions about others.

25. DHAMMAYANGYI PAGODA, Bagan, Myanmar *(opposite)*
26. Lotus tile, WAT PHRA THAT LUANG, Luang Prabang, Laos

27. WAT SI PHOUTTHABATH, Luang Prabang, Laos *(opposite)*
28 & 29. PO WIN DAUNG CAVES, near Monywa, Myanmar *(above and overleaf)*

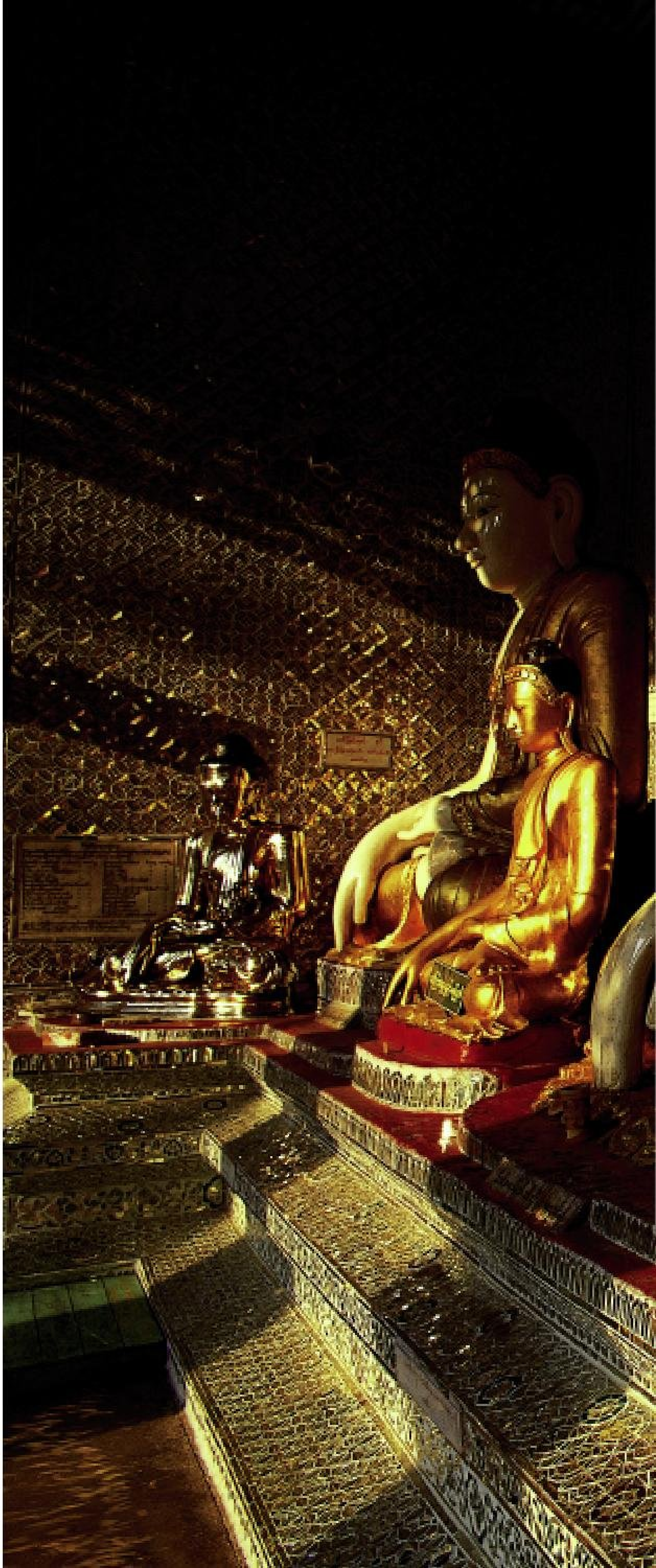
The fool who knows he is a fool
Is that much wiser.
The fool who thinks he is wise
Is a fool indeed.

The fool is his own enemy.
The mischief he does is his undoing.
How bitterly he suffers!

30. *Phra Kantharat*, WAT NA PHRA MEN, Ayutthaya, Thailand *(opposite)*
31. Lotus, Cambodia

32. Kyaikpun Paya, Bago, Myanmar

33. Bayon, Angkor Thom, Siem Reap, Cambodia
34. South Gate, Angkor Thom, Siem Reap, Cambodia *(opposite)*
35. Shitthaung Pagoda, Mrauk U, Myanmar *(overleaf)*



36. Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon, Myanmar

ဘုရားပလ္လင်ခုံပေါ်အတွင်းအပြင်
မည်သည့်ပစ္စည်းမှမထားရ

There is no fire like passion,
No crime like hatred,
No sorrow like separation,
No sickness like hunger,
And no joy like the joy of freedom.

37. Taungtoo Zedi, Inle Lake, Myanmar

The Path

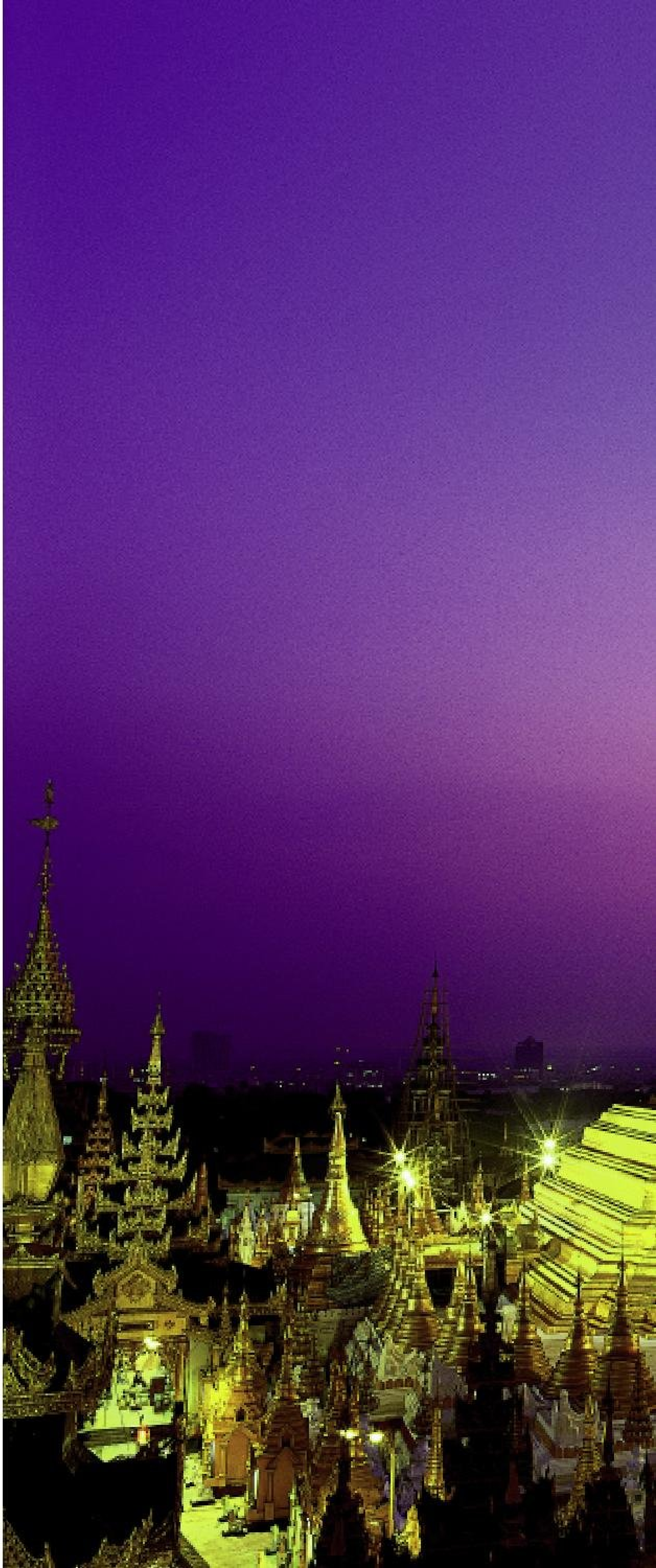
First establish yourself in the way,
Then teach,
And so defeat sorrow.
To straighten the crooked
You must first do a harder thing—
Straighten yourself.
You are your only master.
Who else?
Subdue yourself,
And discover your master.

If the traveler can find
A virtuous and wise companion
Let him go with him joyfully
And overcome the dangers of the way.

If the traveler cannot find
Master or friend to go with him,
Let him travel on alone
Rather than with a fool for company.

38. SHWEYATTAW, Mandalay Hill, Myanmar

39. On the path to SHWEUMIN, near Pindaya Caves, Myanmar *(opposite)*
40. WAT SRA SRI, Sukhothai, Thailand

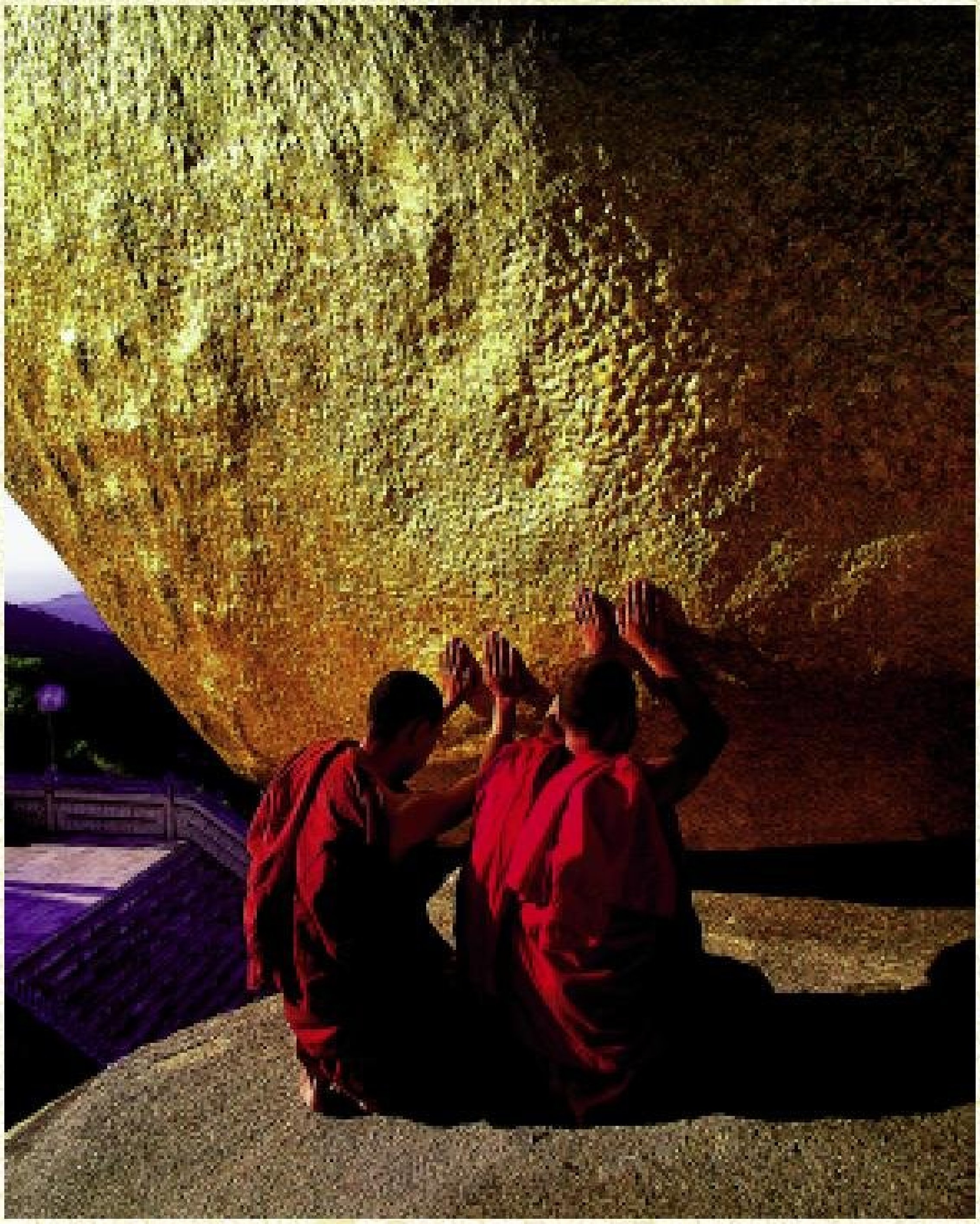


41. Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon, Myanmar

By absence of grasping one is made free.

42. Wat Phra Singh, Chiang Mai, Thailand

43 & 44. THANBODDHAY PAGODA, Monywa, Myanmar



Look within.
Be still.
Free from fear and attachment,
Know the sweet joy of the way.

45 & 46. Kyaiktiyo Pagoda, Myanmar

47. Wat Sen Soukharam, Luang Prabang, Laos

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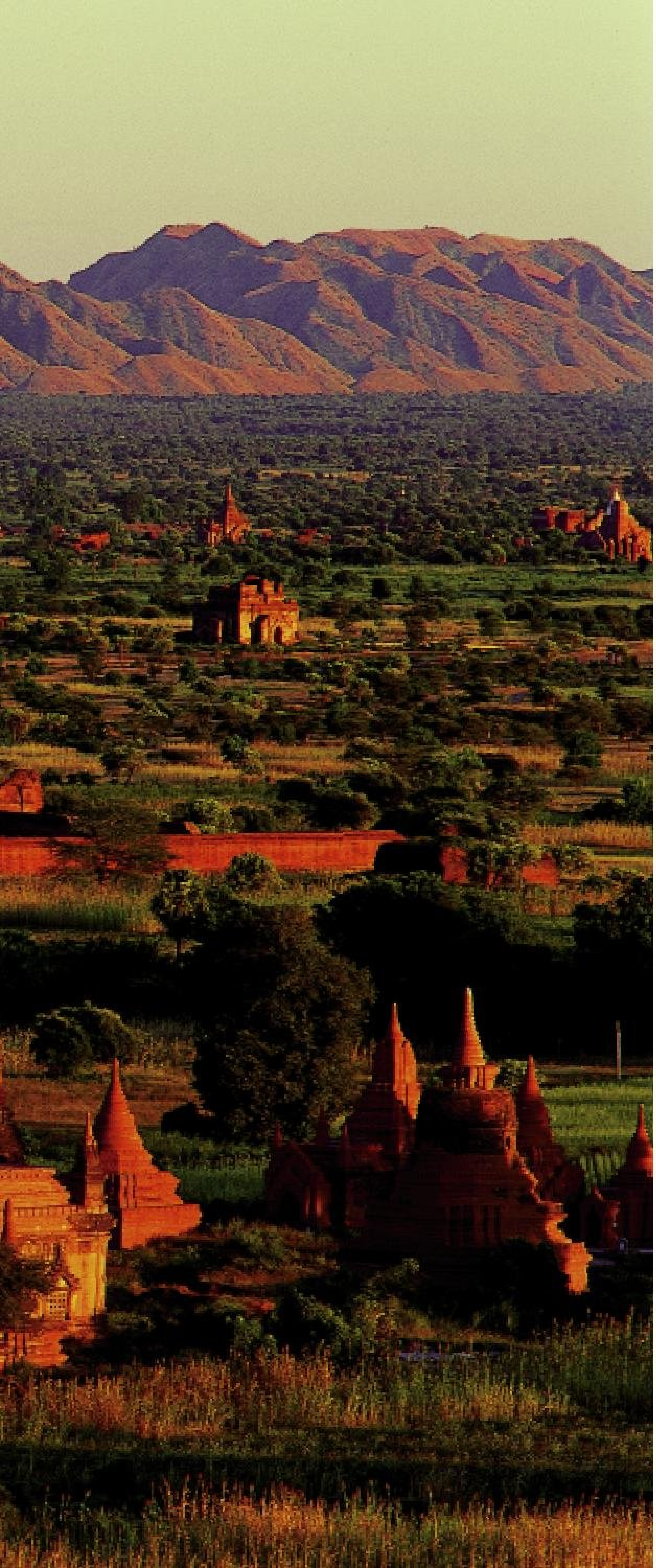
48. Botataung Pagoda, Yangon, Myanmar



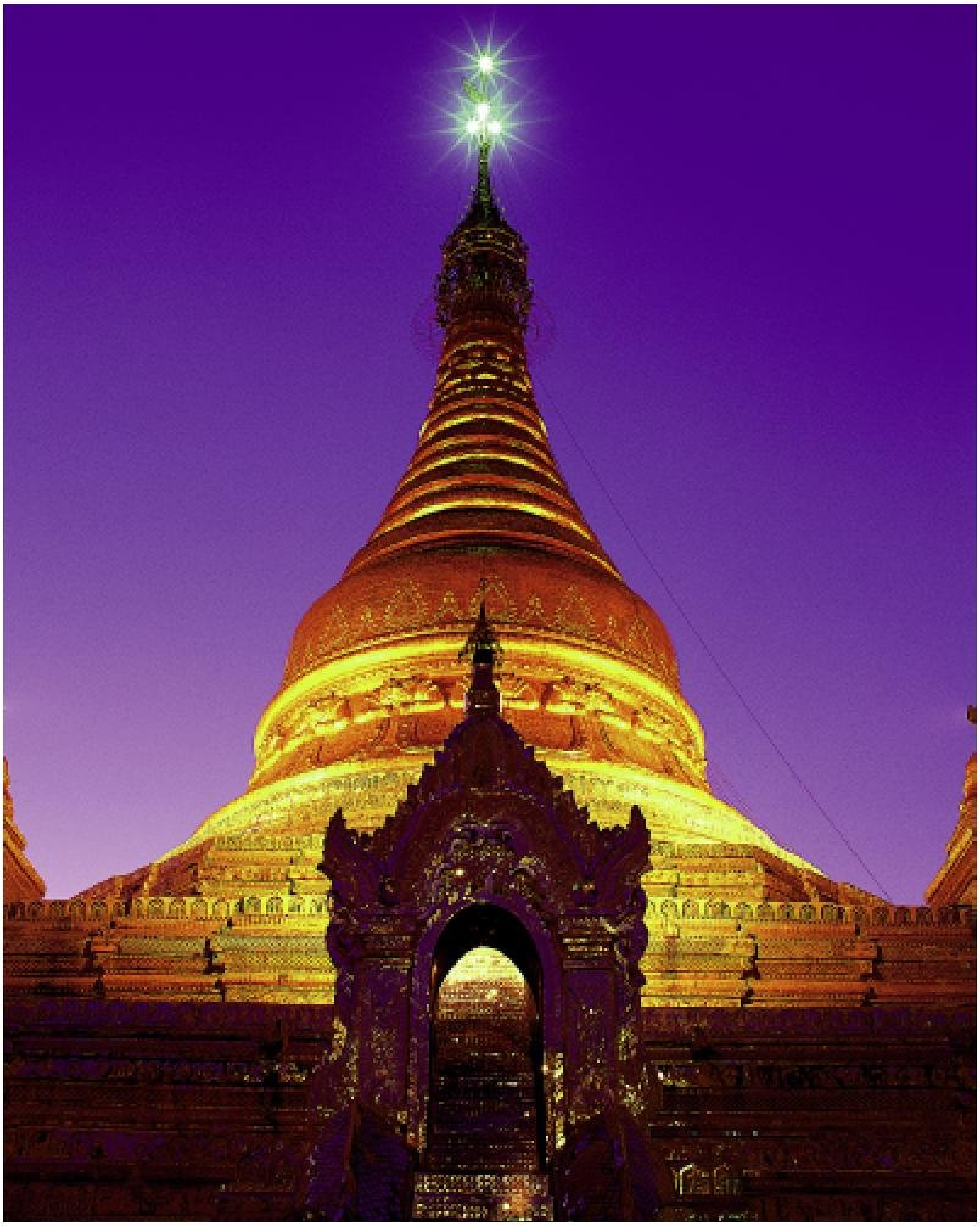
81

51. Dhammayangyi Pagoda, Bagan, Myanmar

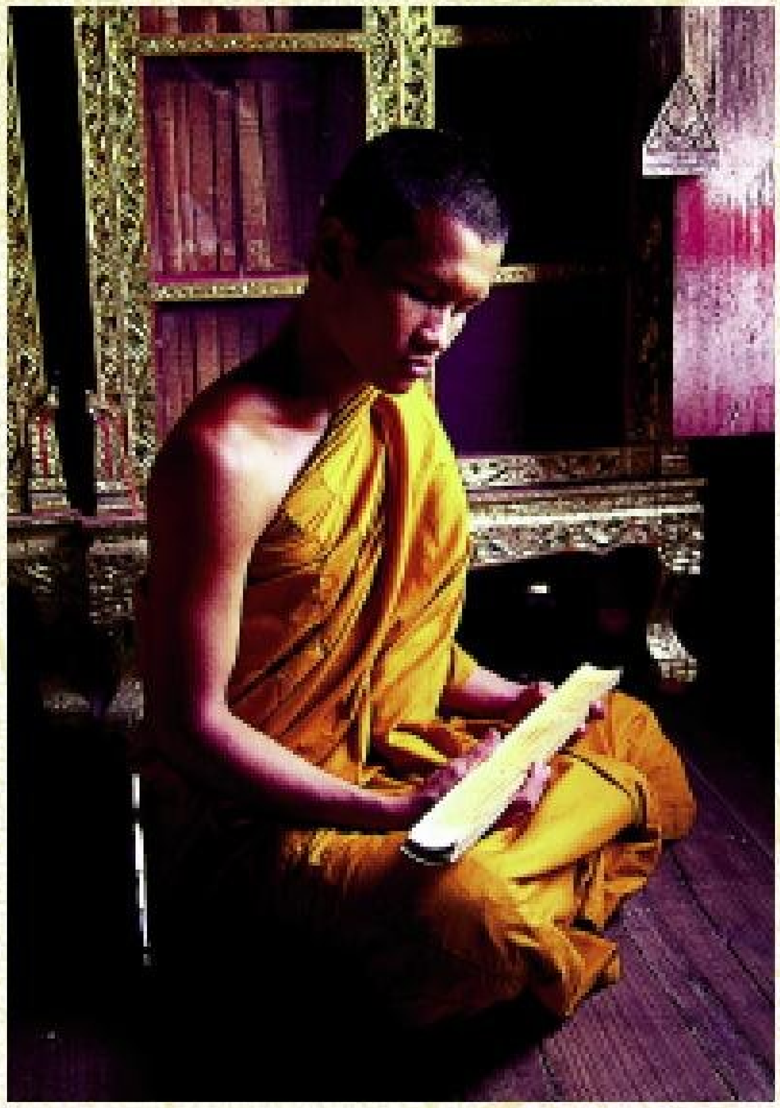
When a man has crossed over a river
By the raft which he has built,
He must leave the raft
And proceed on his journey.

In this way I have taught you
The Dharma for getting across,
Not for retaining.
You must not cling to states of mind.

52. PHARA OUK, Mrauk U, Myanmar



53 & 54. Eindawya Pagoda, Mandalay, Myanmar

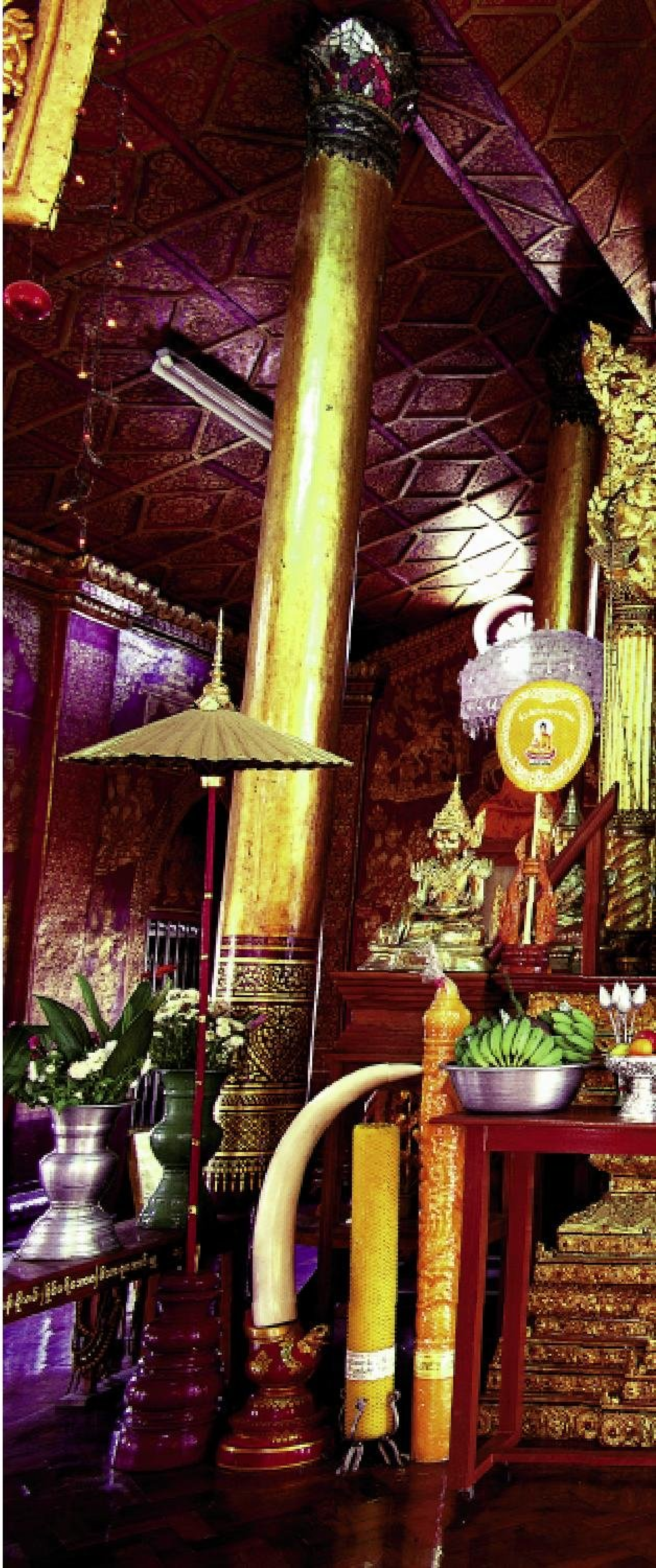


Your worst enemy cannot harm you
As much as your own thoughts, unguarded.

But once mastered,
No one can help you as much,
Not even your father or your mother.

56. Palm leaf texts, WAT THUNG SI MUANG, Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand
57. SHWESIGONE PAGODA, Monywa, Myanmar *(opposite)*

58 & 59. SHWEDAGON PAGODA, Yangon, Myanmar

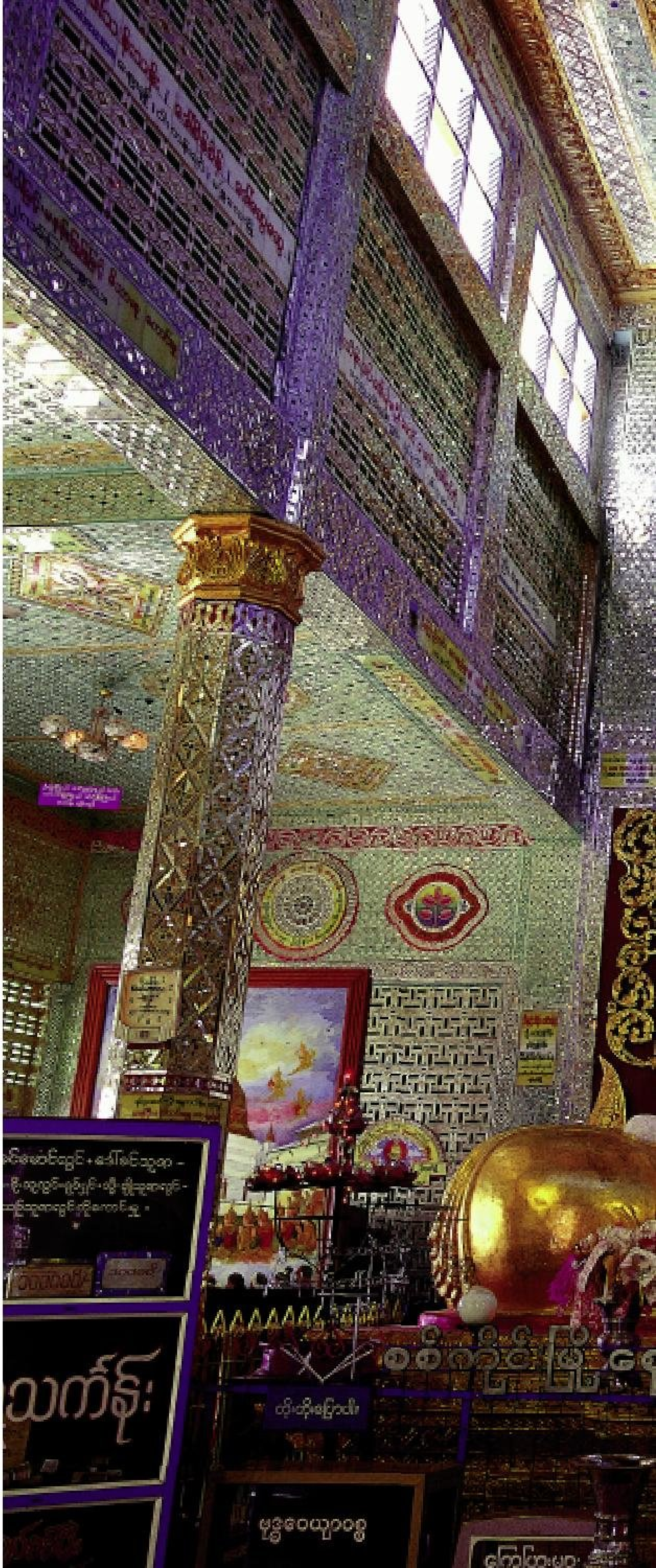


60. WAT JONG KHAM, Kyaing Tong, Myanmar

As a silversmith sifts dust from silver,
Remove your own impurities
Little by little.

Or as iron is corroded by rust
Your own mischief will consume you.

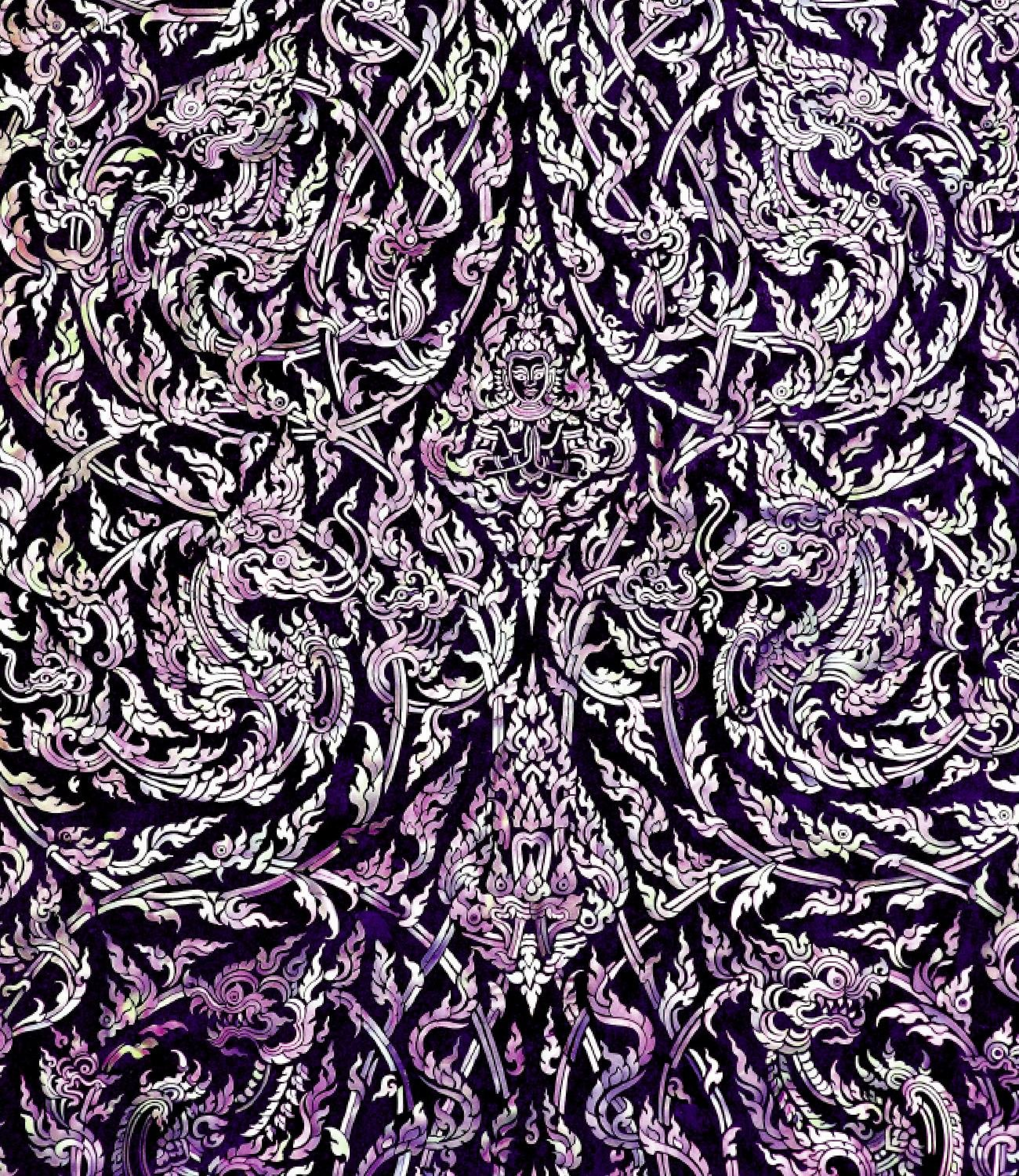
61. SHWEDAGON PAGODA, Yangon, Myanmar *(opposite)*
62. *Chinthe*, SHWEDAGON PAGODA, Yangon, Myanmar
63. SHWEDAGON PAGODA, Yangon, Myanmar *(overleaf)*

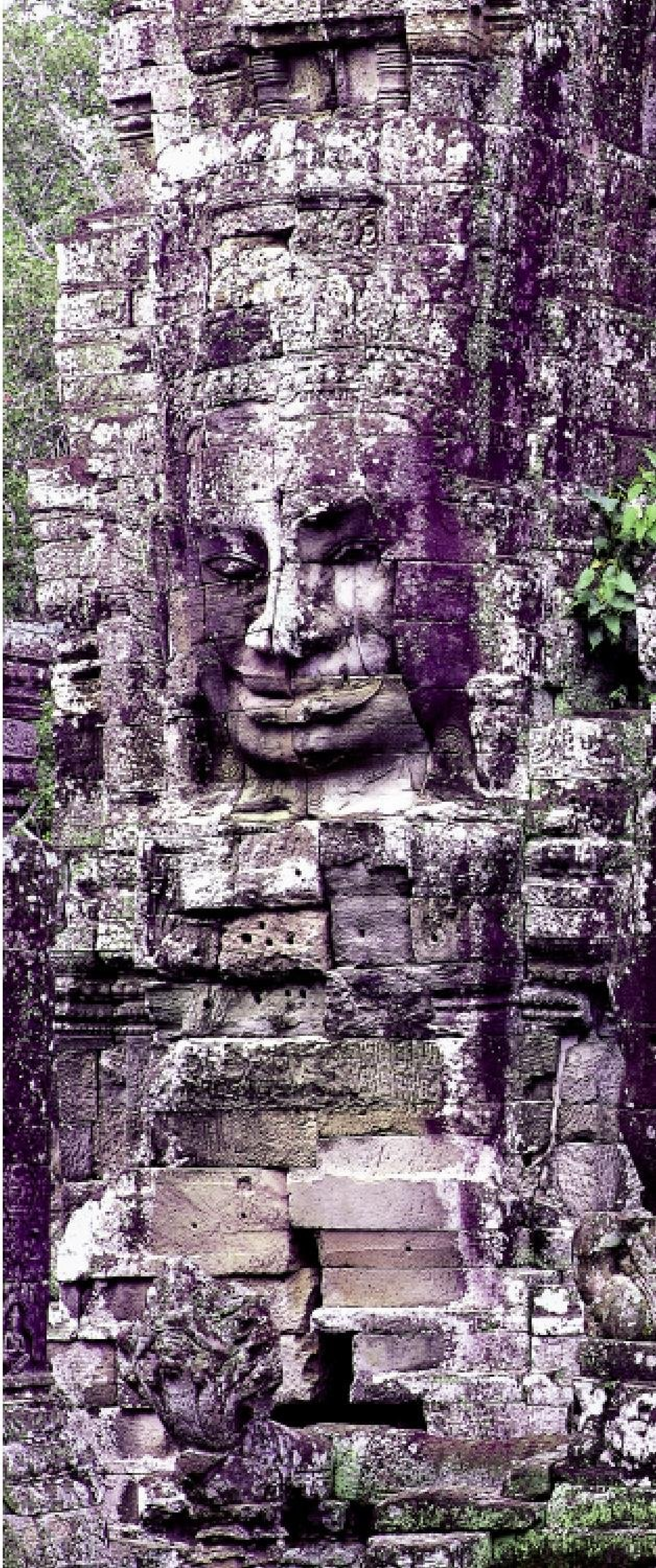


64. Soon U Ponya Shin Zedi,
Sagaing, Myanmar

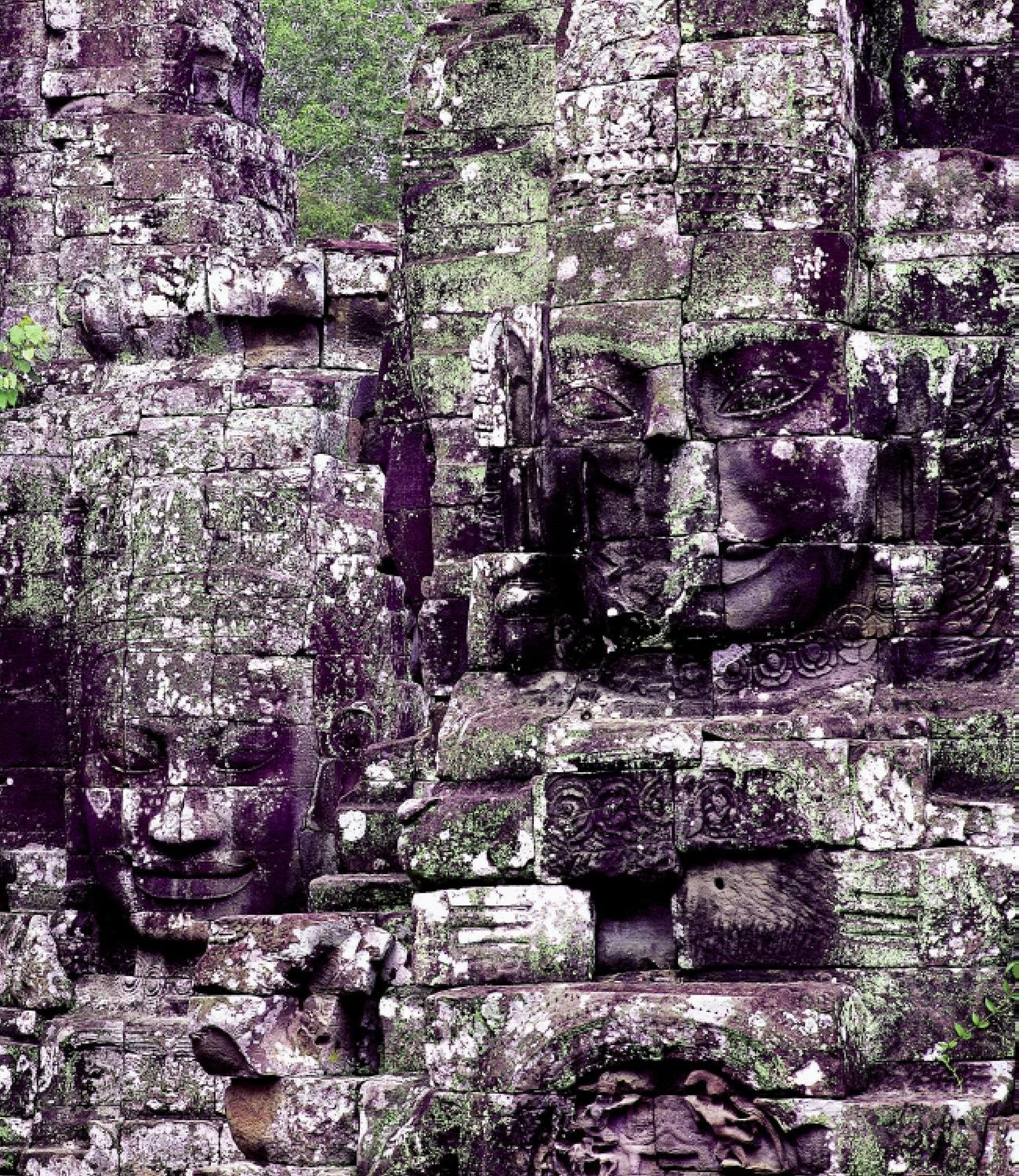
With a free mind, in no debt,
Enjoy what has been given to you.
Get rid of the tendency to judge yourself
Above, below, or equal to others.

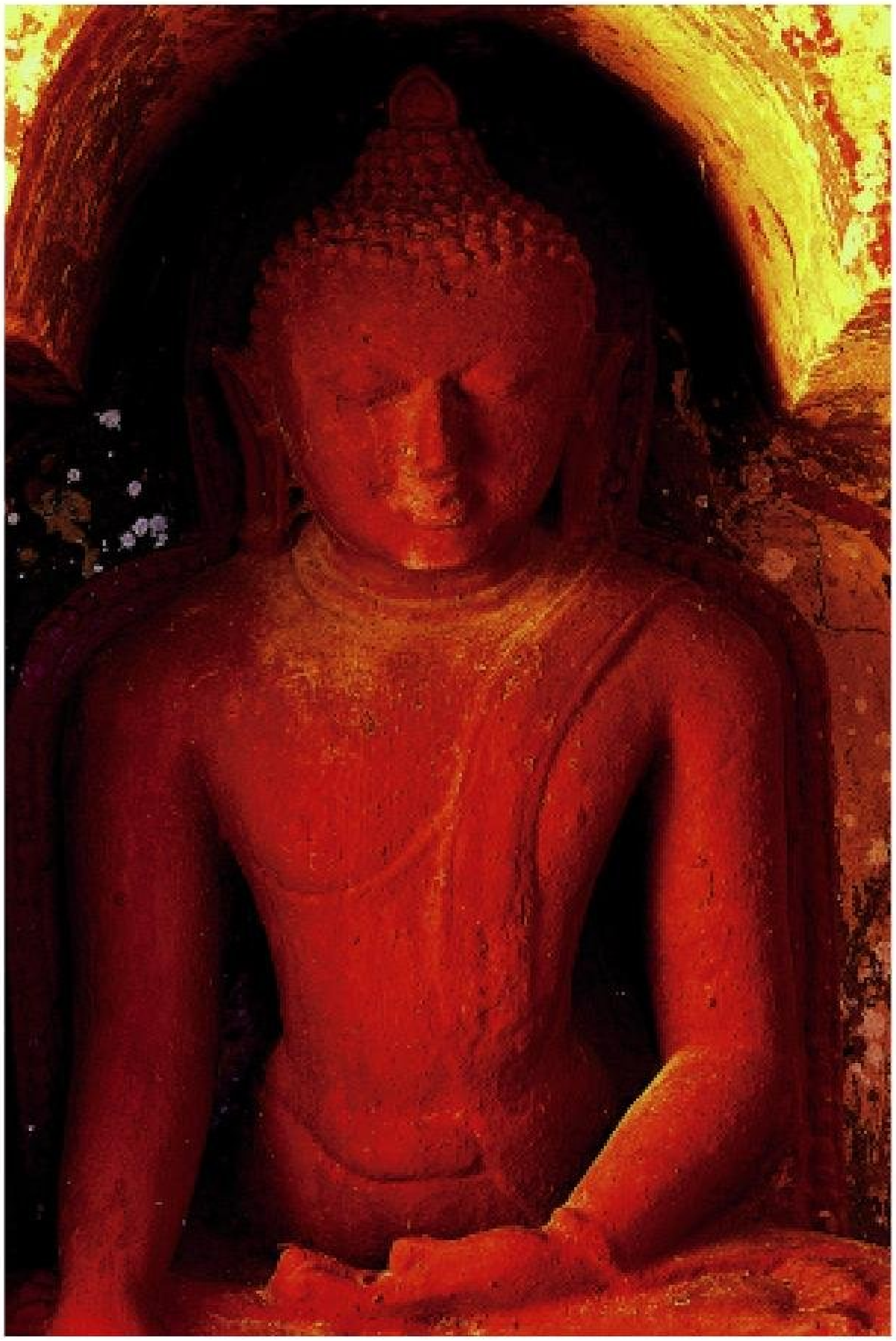
65. Detail, Mother-of-pearl doors, WAT RAJABOPIT, Bangkok, Thailand



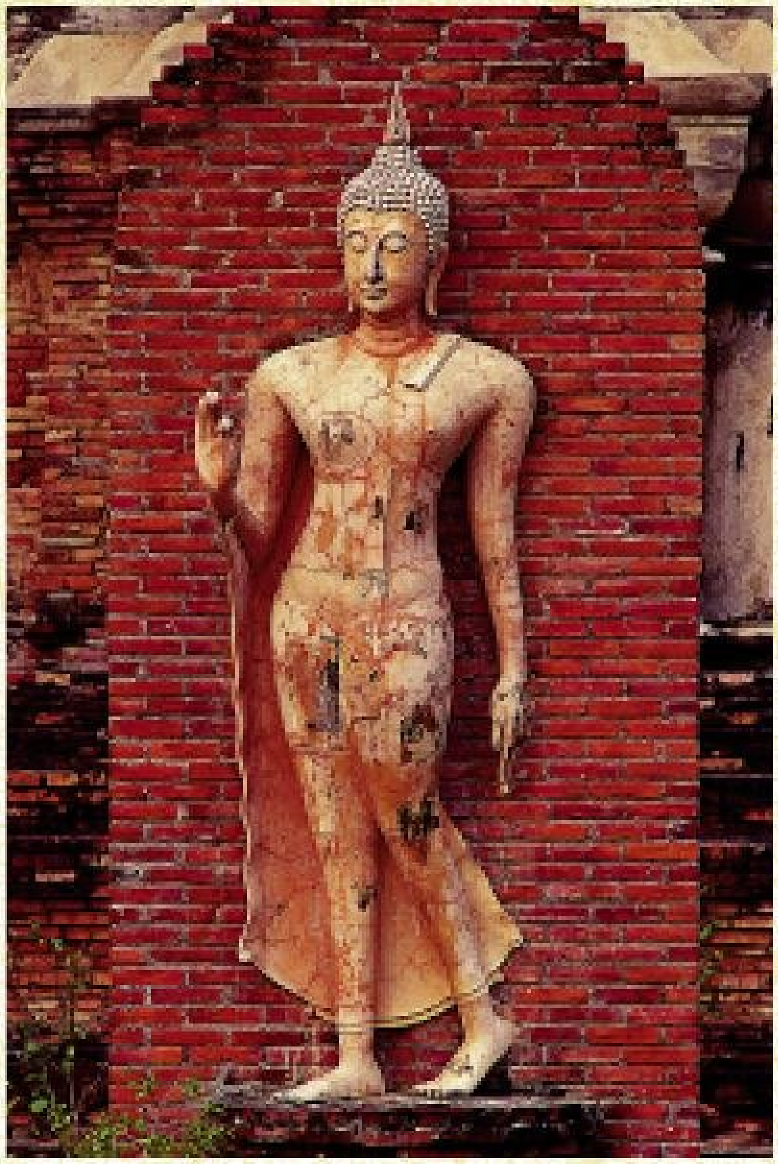


66. Bayon, Angkor Thom,
Siem Reap, Cambodia





67. ANANDA PAGODA, Bagan, Myanmar
68. THAM TING, PAK OU CAVES, Mekong River, Laos *(opposite)*



As a mother watches over her child,
Willing to risk her own life to protect her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings,
Suffusing the whole world
With unobstructed loving-kindness.

69. Mingla Manaung Zedi, Mrauk U, Myanmar *(opposite)*
70. Wat Chetupon, Sukhothai, Thailand

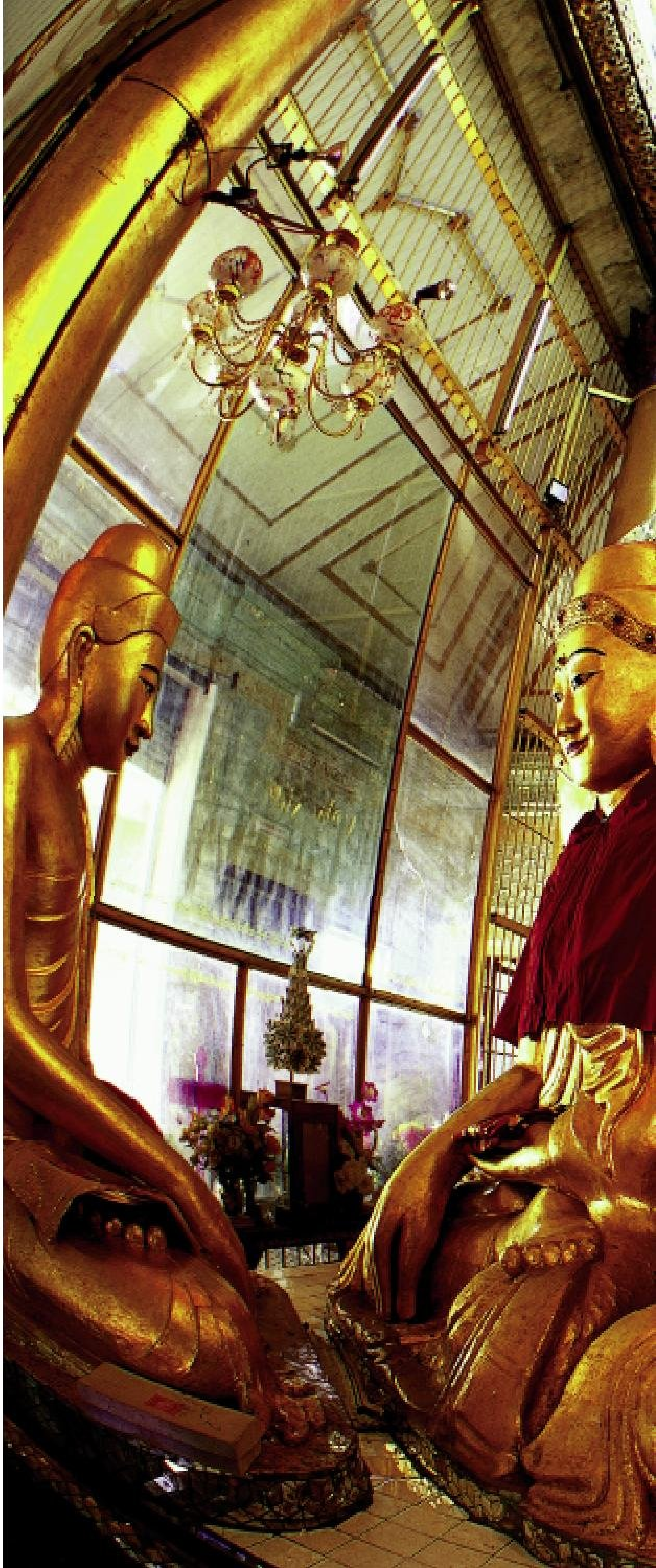
Develop the state of mind of friendliness,
For, as you do so, ill-will will grow less;
And of compassion, for thus vexation will grow less;
And of joy, for thus aversion will grow less;
And of equanimity, for thus repugnance will grow less.

71. Monks begging for food, THAKYA BON ZEDI, Bagan, Myanmar
72. Meditating at BAWBAWGYI PAYA, Sri Ksetra, Myanmar *(opposite)*

With gentleness overcome anger.
With generosity overcome meanness.
With truth overcome deceit.

74. Lotus on wooden bell, WAT CHAN, Vientiane, Laos

75. Ohnmin Thonza Paya, Sagaing, Myanmar



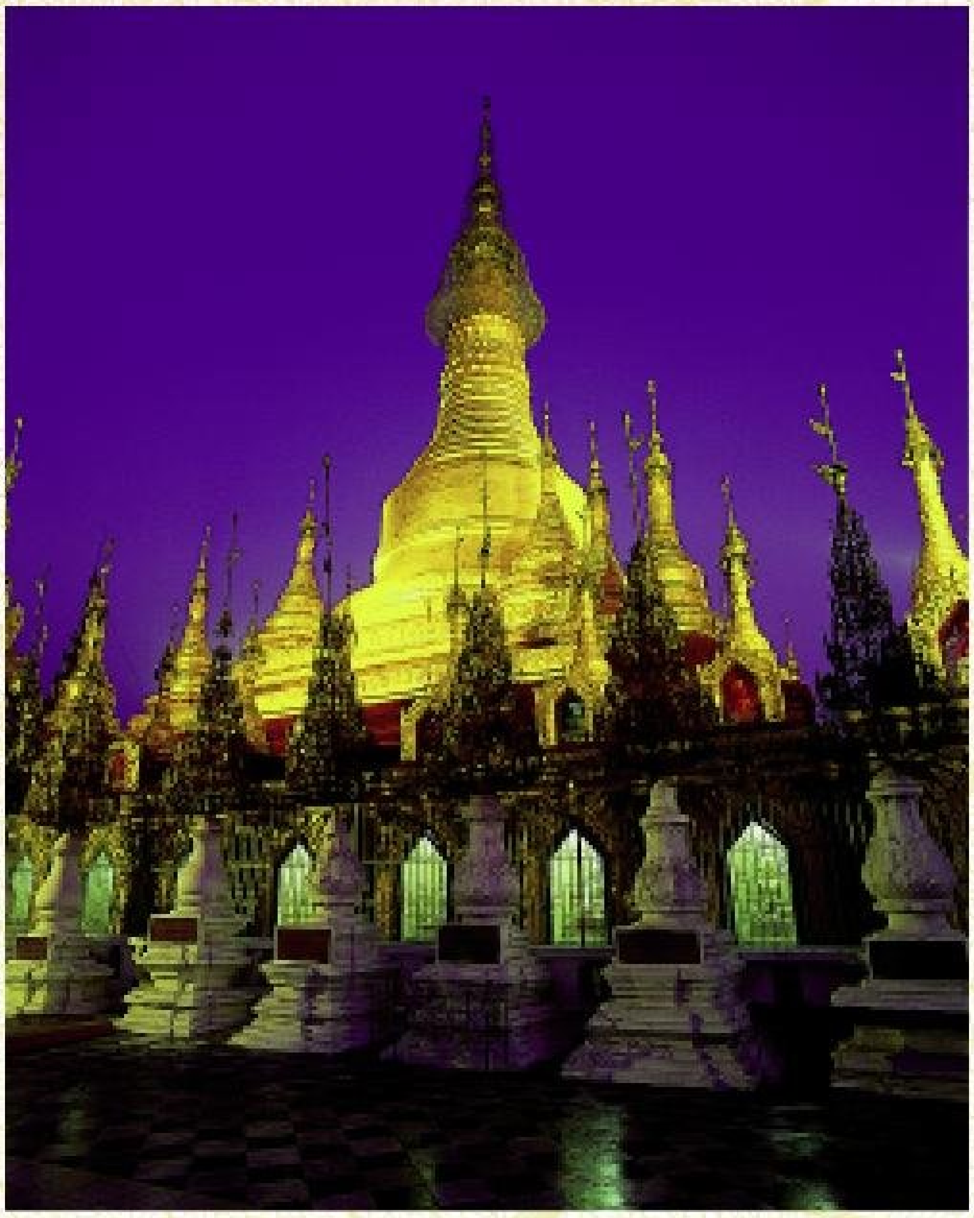
76. *Kyaikhami,* YAYLEH PAGODA,
Kyaikhami, Myanmar

All beings tremble before violence.
All fear death.
All love life.

See yourself in others.
Then whom can you hurt?
What harm can you do?

77. *Maha Muni*, Mandalay, Myanmar

78. Wat Phra That Luang,
Vientiane, Laos

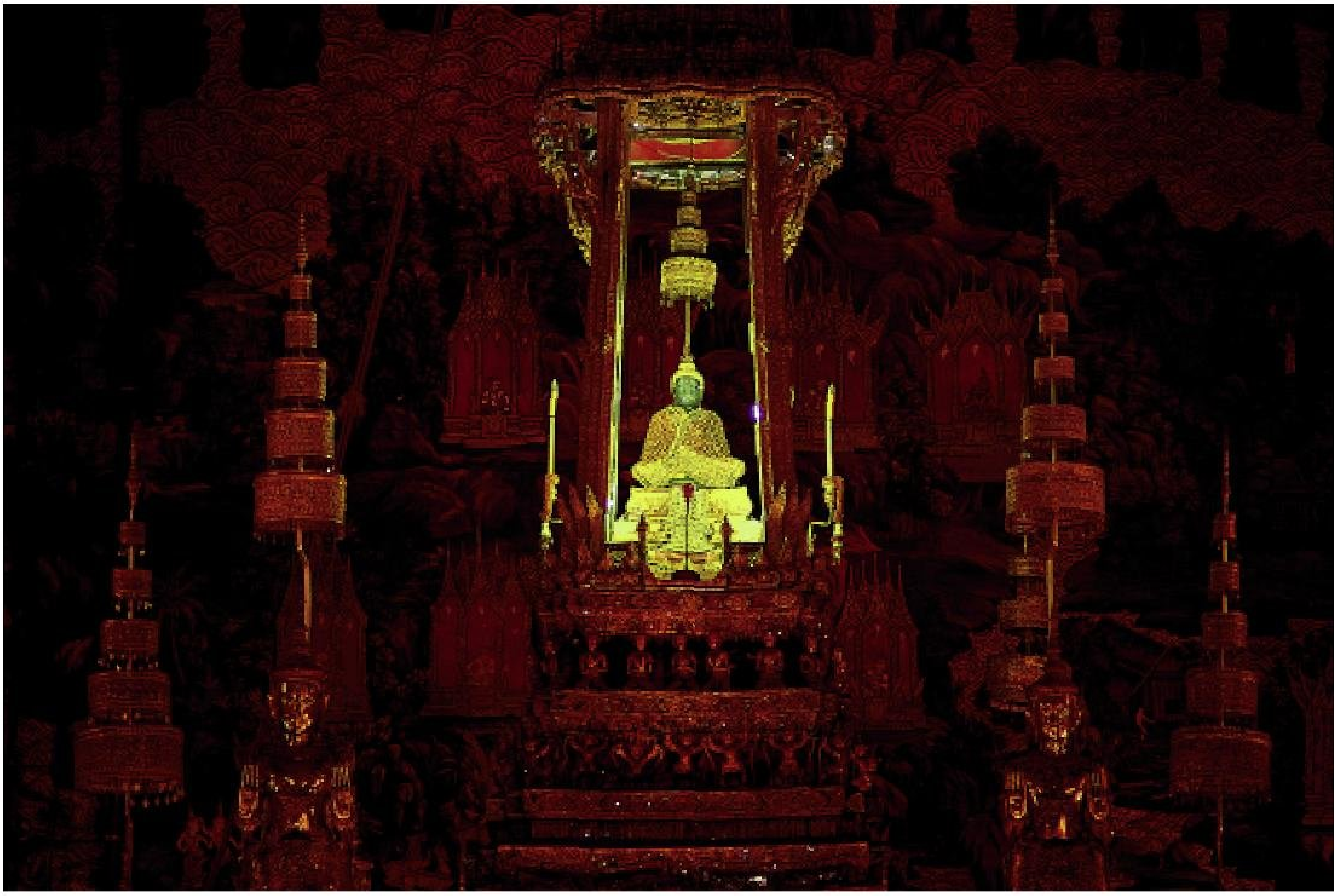


What one has heard there,
One does not repeat here,
So as to cause dissension here.
Thus one unites those that are divided;
And those that are united, one encourages.

79. SHWEDAGON PAGODA, Yangon, Myanmar *(opposite)*
80. SHWESANDAW PAGODA, Pyay, Myanmar

If you will not take care of each other,
Who else will do so?
Those who would attend to me,
Let them attend to the sick.

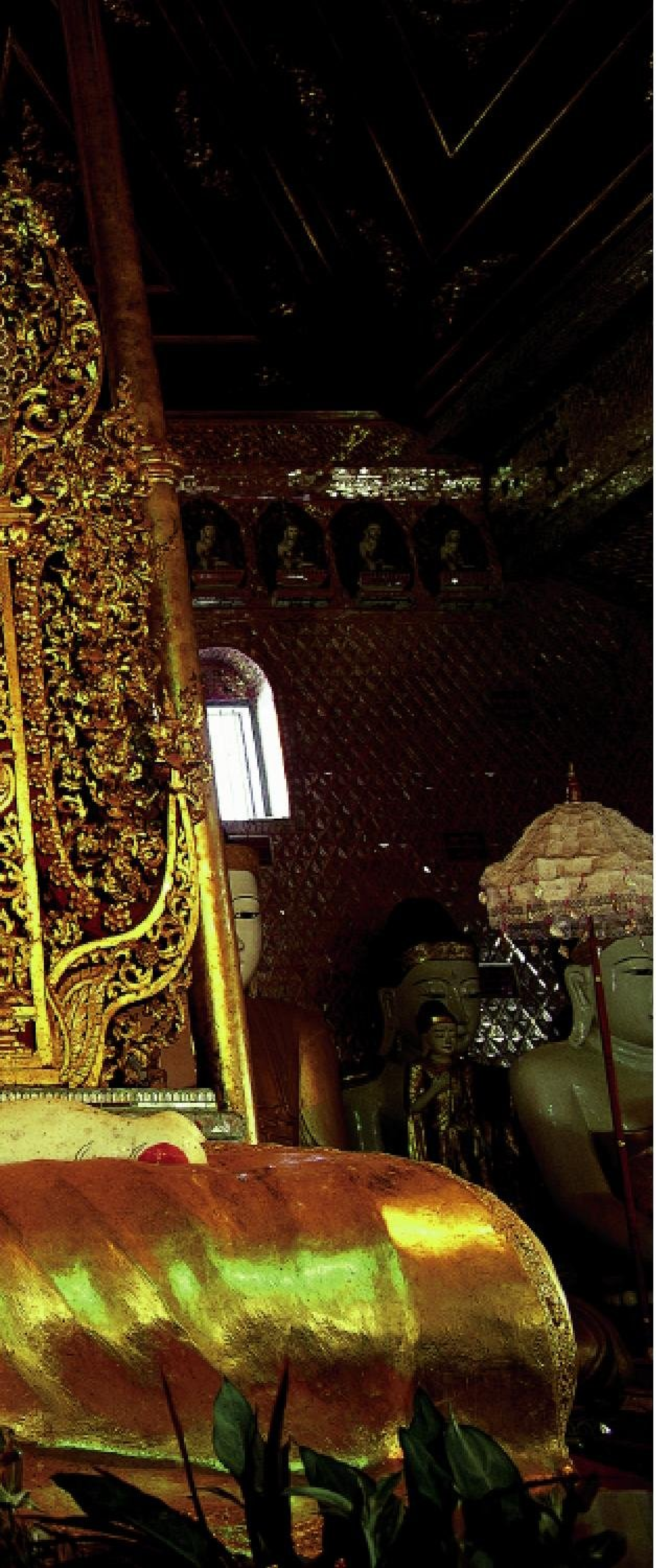
81. Wat Rajatarm Loang, Kyaing Tong, Myanmar
82. Buddhist scriptures, Kuthadaw Pagoda, Mandalay, Myanmar *(opposite)*



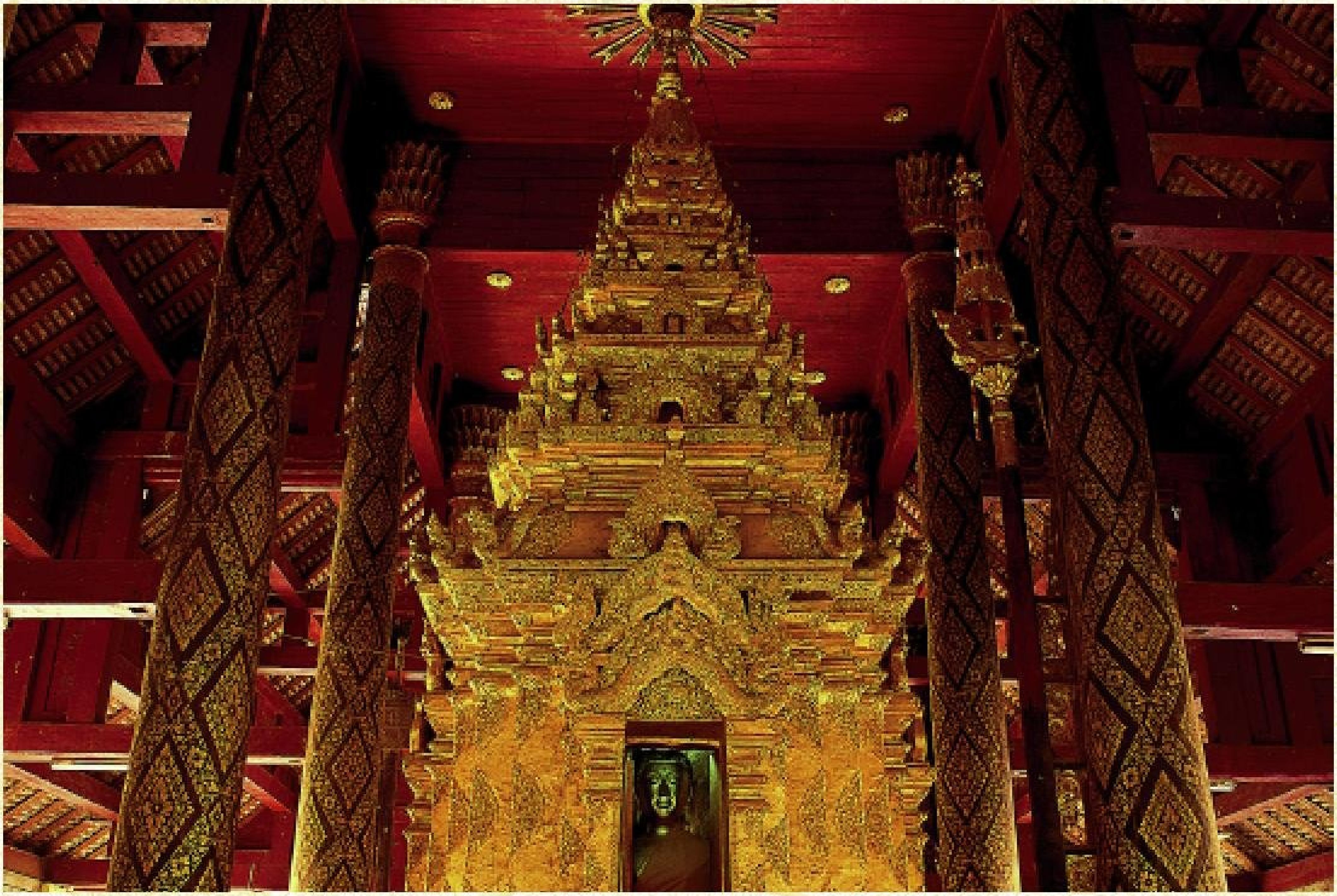
83. *The Emerald Buddha*, WAT PHRA KAEO, GRAND PALACE, Bangkok, Thailand
84. WAT BENJAMABOPIT, Bangkok, Thailand *(opposite)*

Harsh words do not serve as a remedy
And are pleasant to no one.

85. KYAIKBAWLAW PAGODA, Kyaikto, Myanmar *(opposite)*
86. WAT PHAN TAO, Chiang Mai, Thailand



87. Shwesayan Pagoda, Thaton, Myanmar



The greatest gain is to give to others;
The greatest loss is to receive without gratitude.

88. *Phra Chao Lang Thong*, WAT PHRA THAT, Lampang Luang, Thailand
89. *Sehhtatgyi*, Pyay, Myanmar *(opposite)*
90. Detail, Ceramic decoration, WAT RAJABOPIT, Bangkok, Thailand *(overleaf)*